v. 3, n. 21, 2023

International Journal of Human Sciences Research

DEMOCRACIES IN RETRACTION

Isaías Pascoal
Doutor em Ciências Sociais
Pouso Alegre - Minas Gerais
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/7024609519643587

Andressa Thainá Moraes Resende
Faculdade de Direito do Sul de Minas
Pouso Alegre - Minas Gerais
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/3991565024418285

Gabriel Macedo Rezende
Universidade do Vale do Sapucaí
Pouso Alegre - Minas Gerais
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/1566344171901970

Yago Vinícius Pereira Andrade
Faculdade de Direito do Sul de Minas
Pouso Alegre - Minas Gerais
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/8143295909009043

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Abstract: The democratic regime is not an ahistorical construction. It arose in societies with very specific characteristics. Most of history has not known democratic regimes. Nothing guarantees its perpetuity. The short period of historical existence demonstrates that at certain times it went into crisis, but later recovered. He is currently going through a serious crisis caused by multiple factors. Society profoundly changed its structures and reached the configuration of democratic regimes. Its institutions, adapted for the previous historical moment, are out of step with the reality of the new times. Today its biggest threat is populism. It is not certain that democracy will come to an end. As in the past, it can reinvent itself and have a long life. This depends on how society will act, especially its leaders. There are ways to minimize and restore the health of broken democracies. It depends on the answers given by society.
Keywords: democracy, crisis, conflict, history, populism, authoritarianism

INTRODUCTION

Life in a society with a long tradition of democracy can create a sense of naturalness in the institutions, values and relationships that characterize a democratic regime. Nothing more illusory. Like all human constructions and, among them, democracy, nothing escapes the scrutiny of history. Everything carries the marks of time in its DNA. Temporality is the ontological condition of human experience.

For most of the history of men on the planet, democracy, as we experience it today and, even in its ancient condition in Athens, was absent from daily political action and social relations. Very precise historical conditions were at its birth in ancient Athens and in its representative version that made its appearance in the 17th century in Europe. Democracy does not arise anywhere, regardless of the historical conditions that make its emergence and affirmation possible.

In his celebrated study of countries' trajectories towards modernity, Barrington Moore Jr. (1983) highlights three itineraries, which later culminated in socialism, Nazi-fascism and liberal democracy. The last two with capitalist economy. It was historical circumstances that allowed, respectively, the peasant revolutions, the transition to late capitalism and the revolutions and civil wars sponsored by a class with an independent economic base, in this case, the bourgeoisie.

In the famous pages of the "History of the Peloponnesian War" praising the Athenian political system, Thucydides (1987, p. 98) makes Pericles state that "we live under a form of government that is not based on the institutions of our neighbors; on the contrary, we serve as a model to some rather than imitating others." He highlights the liberality of Athens, its institutions and cultural characteristics that make it "the school of all Hellas" (p. 99) and that "we will be admired not only by the men of today, but also of the future" (p. 100). In fact, Athens' golden age mostly coincided with the reign under Pericles (461 to 431 BC). The city became a hegemonic power in the eastern Mediterranean and shone culturally, economically, politically and militarily as hegemon.

Less than 30 years later, plunged into crisis due to the defeat in the Peloponnesian war, the city lived under the regime of oppression under the "30 tyrants". Although the democratic regime was rebuilt in subsequent years, it never returned to its heyday and was definitively buried in the internal struggles of the Greek world and the Macedonian conquest. As stated by John Keane (2010, p. 16) "democracy is not a timeless realization of our political destiny. It is not a model of doing politics that has always been with us or will be our companion for the rest of human history."

Its contingency is an aspect that cannot

be neglected. At various times in its recent history, it seemed to be facing an abyss. But she managed, in different ways, to circumvent problematic situations and expand at other times. It is the dance of history that has nothing predictable about it. It has a lot of unusual. Who would have thought that at "american pax" and the "end of history" in Francis Fukuyama's popularized version of the 1990s, less than three decades later, the world would once again be looking over the cliff?

Since the economic crisis that started in 2008 in the US and which quickly spread around the world, the economies of most countries have been facing difficulties. The feeling of social malaise took hold of broad sectors of society and a feeling of uncertainty about the future reached, especially among the youngest, and generated insecurity in the middle classes.

Since the 1990s, globalization has been generating inequalities between countries and within countries, some sectors have failed to be competitive in the global economy, as in the case of the "rust belt" in the USA, which saw cities depopulating, increasing unemployment or precarious employment. Situation that tensions, apprehension in relation to the future and dissatisfaction with the results of globalization.

In 2011, the "Arab Spring" began, the war spread to North Africa and the Near East, generating huge waves of refugees to Europe. The pressure on the demographic and social structure of many European countries became potentially explosive politically, both on the governments that welcomed and on those that imposed obstacles to the entry of refugees.

In Central America, the economic and political crisis increased the flow of migrants to the USA. A good part entered illegally and generated the political radicalization of sectors of the Republican party and of American society averse to what was happening.

At the same time, the struggle for identity recognition was gaining strength in society, especially in the Western type, which was increasingly fragmented and which produced a huge number of small groups (tribes) with their slogans and specific flags in continuous struggle against the rivals. In reaction, a conservative wave swept societies. Based on religious principles and traditional values, it fights to avoid the loss of national, religious, social and sexual identity.

This all happened in the midst of a technological revolution that reached and still affects society, splitting time into an increasingly distant past, a fleeting present and an absolutely uncertain future. Microelectronics, genetic engineering and molecular biology made, in the view of Harari (2016a, 2016b) the Sapiens species reaching the threshold of the species to give way to Homo Deus.

Of all the revolutions, the one that most impacted people's imagination and feelings was the one related to information. The world is going through a paradigm shift in this sector. A new language and a new form of communication is changing man's place in society. The digital revolution allowed the advent of the internet and social networks. In a very short time the world has become a global village for better and for worse. Instant communication, unfiltered messaging and fake news are advancing like never before.

The last decade has crystallized the post-truth realm. Information is produced in geometric progression and it is impossible to critically process it. Society, called the "knowledge society", lives in a mess of misinformation and credulity.

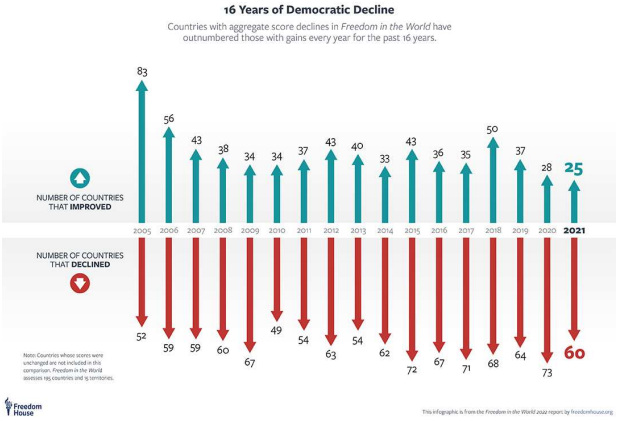
The set comes to seem apocalyptic. What to do? It is in this context that democratic regimes begin to experience an identity crisis. Significantly increases the number of people living under authoritarian and

illiberal regimes, or in regimes with serious breakdowns in democratic structures. The way this malfunction manifests itself is through "populism". The concept, which is not new, has expanded and become popular. Political leaders classified as populist proliferate everywhere, regardless of party color or political spectrum.

What is happening, where is humanity going, would democracy be in a final crisis? It is possible to act to try to control the process and avoid its collapse?

AN AGE OF INSECURITY

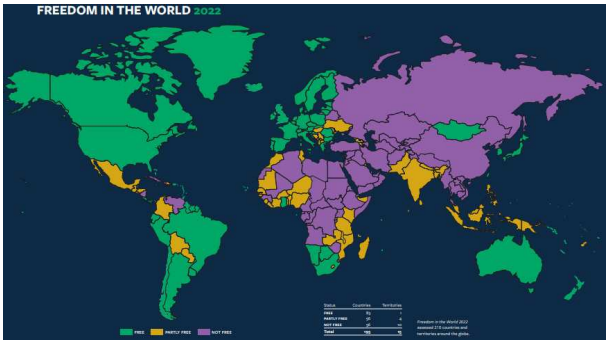
The current threat to democracy is the result of 16 consecutive years of declining global freedom. In 2022, according to Freedom House, 60 countries experienced a drop-in freedom, while only 25 countries showed improvements.


16 Years of Democratic Decline
Countries with aggregate score declines in Freedom in the World have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 16 years.
NUMBER OF COUNTRIES THAT IMPROVED
NUMBER OF COUNTRIES THAT DECLINED
2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021
83 56 43 38 34 34 37 43 40 33 43 36 35 50 37 28 25
52 59 59 60 67 49 54 63 54 62 72 67 71 68 64 73 60
Freedom House

Source: Freedom House

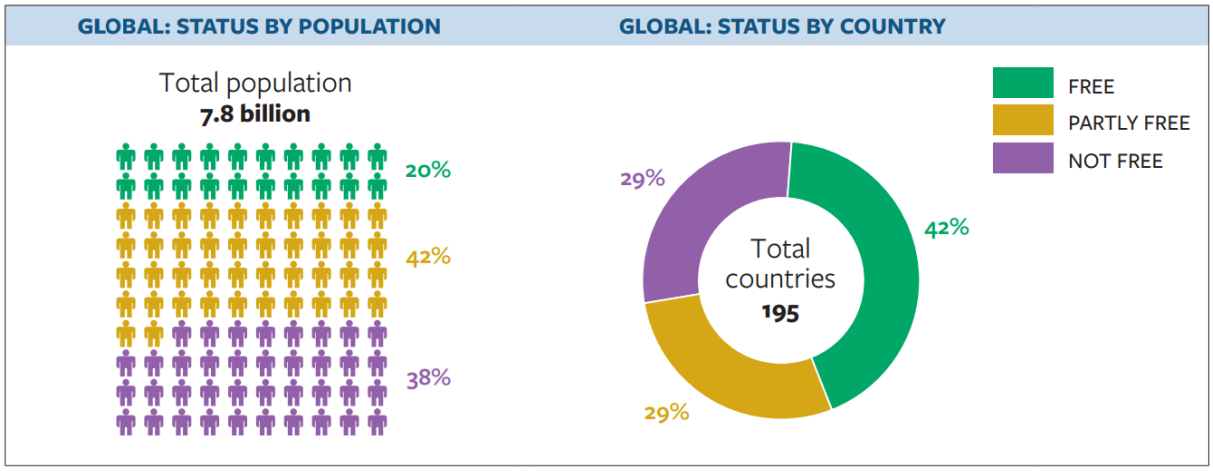
According to Inglehart (2018), the world is going through an era of insecurity. The coming to power of Donald Trump in 2016 in the United States sounded the international alarm (LEVITSKY and ZIBLATT, 2017; RUNCIMAN, 2018). In 2018, Bolsonaro won the presidential election in Brazil. Venezuela under Maduro marched towards open dictatorship. In 2021, for example, the president of Nicaragua secured a new term through a fraudulent election, where opposition candidates were arrested and civil society groups had their registration cancelled. In Italy, the far-right coalition led by Giorgia Meloni came to power and, in Sweden, although with a fragile majority, the conservative Ulf Kristersson was approved by the Swedish Parliament. Marine Le Pen did not beat Emmanuel Macron in 2022, but grew by 7.6 percentage points compared to the 2017 election (33.9% and 41.5%). Even in Spain, since 2018 the far-right Vox party has been attracting new voters.

The picture of damage to democracy is composed of consolidated dictatorships (China, Cuba and North Korea), countries close to it (Venezuela, Nicaragua and Russia) and countries that dehydrated democratic institutions (Brazil, USA, Hungary, Poland and Mexico), marked by right-wing or left-wing populism:



Source: Freedom House

The Freedom in the world 2022 report points out that approximately 38% of the world's population reside in non-free countries, the highest proportion since 1997. Only 20% of the entire world's population is truly free.



Source: Freedom House

WHY THE DEMOCRATIC RECESSION TODAY?

The world is undergoing rapid and profound changes in all dimensions. The globalization of the economy advanced, creating an elite that became rich and accompanied the demands of the new reality, while other social groups found themselves swallowed up by international competition, lost jobs or saw wage gains reduced. For the first time since the Industrial Revolution, in many places part of the population is unable to rise economically above the level of their parents. Hence a feeling of economic and social insecurity that predisposes people to disbelieve in the future and fuel the search for messianic solutions to their problems.

In 2008, the crisis in the US real estate sector spread and generated an economic crisis of global dimensions, bringing several countries to the brink of collapse, especially in Europe. Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy and, most of all, Greece went into recession, experienced unemployment and a brutal drop in income. The population revolted and took to the streets, social tensions intensified, extremist political forces grew, but there was no escaping an exhaustive program of fiscal and monetary readjustment that demanded enormous sacrifices from everyone. Although the crisis hit European countries hard, the whole world was caught up in it.

In 2011, a revolutionary wave that became known as the "Arab Spring" began in North Africa and in some countries in the Middle East. It started in Tunisia and spread to Libya, Egypt and neighboring countries, and produced a long and extremely violent civil war in Syria. Dictators were removed from power, as in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt and others were put in check. The political and social disarray produced by the "Arab Spring" generated fear, violence and gave rise to a huge migratory wave of refugees to Europe, straining social and political relations in European countries. The massive arrival of immigrants fed the fear of the population and predisposed them to politically support right-wing rulers with xenophobic discourse. Hungary, Poland, Italy experienced this situation to the extreme, but it affected practically everyone.

The growing waves of immigration to developed countries have created, especially in the most conservative sectors, the feeling of the loss of family values and national identity, which makes them look to the most extreme fields of politics for a way to restore traditional values (INGLEHART, 2018). It is the transition

from a materialist society to a post-materialist one, where values and national identity matter for political decision-making by voters.

Since the end of the 1990s, an enormous cultural change has been intensifying in the world, the result of economic (such as globalization) and technological transformations that have altered the perception of life and the meaning of cultural values in a fast process of wear and tear. More than ever, the feeling that "all that is solid melts into air" is excruciating. Runcimam (2018) states that the world is experiencing the transition from the analogue to the digital era. And it's not just in the field of technology. Politics and culture feel the jolts of the crisis.

Modern societies experience the era of the affirmation of identities. Legitimate, on the one hand, because it is about choosing the ways in which people want to live and express themselves, on the other hand, they create enormous social fragmentation through the tribalization of society. More generic forms of identity, such as nation, class, collectivity, fade into a series of micro identities linked to sex, gender, color, race that are continuously subdivided. It is difficult to find slogans and watchwords capable of uniting groups for universal goals.

Mounk (2014) points out that the ongoing cultural transformations are profound and lead to a sense of loss of national identity caused by globalization and immigration. In this situation of extreme social fragmentation, populist discourses accentuate tensions "by making rhetorical appeals that emphasize us-against-them divisions between 'real people' and foreigners, immigrants and racial, ethnic or religious minorities, as well as powerful elites and political opponents. politicians" (NORRIS, 2021, p. 2).

The accumulated tensions are hyper-dimensioned by the phenomenon of the emergence of social networks in recent decades. The development of information technology and the internet has produced immense possibilities in all fields, notably in social relations. The proliferation of social networks, hailed at the beginning as a creation with a high potential for exercising freedom of thought and social interaction, showed the other side of the coin. Without the traditional institutions that served as a sieve and screen for the circulation of ideas (universities, large journalistic groups), social networks became the land of MMA. Communication between people started to be done directly and immediately. According to Runciman (2018), the advancement of the digital environment contributes to a major social transformation, which has impacted politics. On the one hand, this advance can result in greater and more efficient political mobilization in order to maximize voter power and greater political participation. On the other hand, the growth of misinformation. Words like fake news and post-truth have become everyday usage.

Populist leaders are adept at using digital media to propagate their worldview. The dissemination of fake news ended up becoming a danger to the democratic regime (RUNCIMAN, 2018; KRANISH, 2017; LEVITSKY and ZIBLATT, 2018).

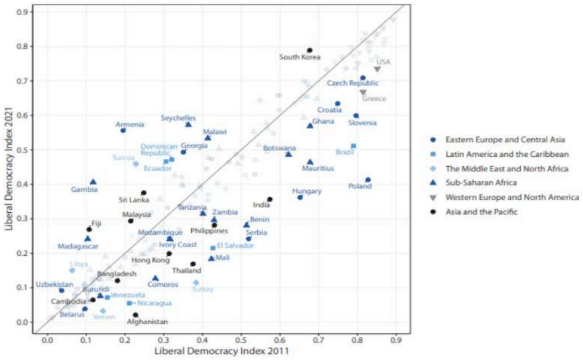
In a time of widespread crisis, the opposition between social groups and people respects no boundaries. It creates ghettos and tribes incapable of dialogue and social interaction. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) address the division in the US between people belonging to or sympathetic to the Democratic and Republican parties. She grew up since the 60s. Previously, it was possible to get along, albeit being in a different party. Today no more. "It is not just political behavior…it expresses attitudes and perceptions that are a danger signal for democracy" (DIAMOND, 2022, p.144). These attitudes disintegrate the consensus and respect for constitutional

norms emphasized by Ziblat and Levitsky.

Polarization has led to extremist behavior in all areas of life. It's not just a matter of economic crisis that pushes people away from each other. It is a worldview that encompasses values, morals and culture. For the health of democracy, nothing is more poisonous.

THE TEMPTATION OF AUTOCRACIES

According to Naim (2022), populism is not based on a unifying ideology among leaders, but on the willingness of autocrats to limit controls over their abuses in order to preserve power. The anti-democratic stalemate is global. The following illustration displays country rankings on the Liberal Democracy Indicator (LDI) in 2011 (x-axis) and 2021 (y-axis). In the region above the diagonal line, countries progressed towards greater democracy, while in the region below the diagonal line, countries tended towards greater authoritarianism. Country names are highlighted when there is a considerable and substantial difference between 2011 and 2021.



Source: Democracy Report

The populists, when they reach power, do not rule out elections and try to give them an appearance of legitimacy. But they use various expedients to weaken the opposition, the checks and balances of the democratic system. They denounce the usurpation of power by the elites. They claim to represent the people as promoters of the rescue of authentic democracy. The attack on the US Capitol was the result of months of campaigning by President Donald Trump to dismiss Joe Biden's victory as illegitimate and fraudulent. The insurrection failed and there was a peaceful transfer of power, but these forces continue to exert significant influence in the US political system.

Elsewhere in the world, democracies also continue to decline under the influence of democratically elected leaders who have pursued illiberal policies (INGLEHART, 2018). India, which has suffered a series of setbacks in political rights and civil liberties since the re-election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019, has shown no signs of changing course, with leading opposition political figures facing arrest and surveillance.

Personalities belonging to the extreme right in countries considered democratic also began to participate in the international collaboration. Eduardo Bolsonaro, son of the former Brazilian president, is a member of a far-right nationalist group led by Steve Bannon, a consultant to former US President Donald Trump. At the same time, Orbán has supported several European colleagues who share his views, shielding them from potential EU sanctions. These leaders include Milorad Dodik, a Serb nationalist leader in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who suppressed internal dissent and pressured Serb-ruled Republika Srpska to secede from the multi-ethnic Bosnian state.

According to Runciman (2018), the current moment inaugurates a populist era. It is not a passing phenomenon. Nor is it confused with one side of the political spectrum (right and left). Populism is a form of action, a method of action that serves the purposes of both the right and the left. Both wish to represent authentic people, criticize globalization, international financial capital and create the image of a fractured society of "us against

them". Alberto Fernandez in Argentina, Lopes Obrador in Mexico and Hugo Chaves in Venezuela are left-wing examples of this way of thinking and acting.

Followers of Trump, Bolsonaro and Orban are everywhere. Even without reaching power, they saw their political representation in society grow significantly in several countries. Recent presidential elections in Colombia, Peru and Chile have seen right-wing populist candidates nearly win the election. Bolsonaro lost the elections in 2022 by a minimal fraction of votes. The National Front in France has long become a significant political force. In the last presidential election, in 2022, Macron had to go to the second round with Marine Le Pen. Vox has become a visible political force in Spain. Even in the consolidated Scandinavian democracies (Sweden and Finland), the parties of the far right emerged victorious. And in Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) won a seat in the German parliament thanks to the significant support it had in the last two elections.

It is not an occasional phenomenon. Will it be a turning point?

MODUS OPERANDI OF POPULISM

Populism has its own modus operandi. It defines the enemies (foreigners, immigrants, ethnic groups, "communists", "fascists" and others) and uses hateful language to characterize them as threats. He uses the expression "people" a lot when he wants to represent it in its purity (MULLER, 2003).

It divides society into a corrupt political elite that has co-opted the system and the population that is attacked and suffers. This justifies the emergence of the strong man: "What the people need is a messianic savior, a champion capable of facing this voracious elite, to dominate it in the name of the people" (NAIM, 2022).

A relationship of identity between the leader and the people is built on the basis of belief and delivery that does not admit questioning. "When someone's identity is built on identification with a leader, any criticism of that leader seems like a personal attack on oneself" (NAIM, 2022, p.4).

Polarization is intrinsic to populism. Accentuating contradictions is a strategy to prosper the "sink or swin" and to end the middle ground of opinions. Discord becomes permanent and tension constant. The other, on the contrary, is defined as an enemy that needs to be eliminated from the political game.

Moisés Naim reports on Hugo Chaves' strategies in Venezuela. On his famous TV show, Aló Presidente. Chávez approached with his performance and created intimate bonds with his followers:

> It was during these moments of personal bonding with his followers, more than during his ideological tirades, that Chávez shifted the basis of allegiance to him from the political realm to the realm of primary identification. These moments turned followers into fans, fans who would in time merge into a political tribe: people who created an identity out of their shared devotion to 'El Comandante' (NAIM, 2022, p.5).

Populist rhetoric always alludes to an idealized past ("America great again", "brexit"), to a utopian future ("never before in this country") and always defines the cause of the present evils faced by the usurped people: immigrants, international capitalists, financial capital, economic and cultural elite, the Troika: European Union, European Central Bank, IMF, privileged minorities and so on.

Once in power, it is almost irresistible to change the electoral system, remake electoral districts (gerrymandaring), change the composition of the courts of law and reduce

their power, attack the media and purge opponents.

Finally, populism makes extensive use of the media of the digital age, spreads fake news, distorts the truth, takes facts out of context, plays with simplistic and Manichaean polarizations and presents solutions to problems that seem easy. Put into practice, they collide with reality and lead society to chaos: inflation, recession, unemployment, violence, political authoritarianism and dictatorship. As followers relate to leaders based on belief and total commitment, there is no room for questioning.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The world has been undergoing profound economic and technological changes that impact all dimensions of personal and social life. It is the ongoing "digital revolution" and post-industrial society, with profound impacts on work organization, culture and personal sensitivity. The political instruments of the democratic order of the 19th and 20th centuries (elections, political parties) are weakened or exhausted in the new reality.

The economic crises of the 21st century, the great waves of migration, the loss of the sense of social well-being, the growth of social inequalities and the deepening of globalization have generated a chaotic situation to which democracies have not been able to adequately respond. Alternatives with an authoritarian (China) and populist profile (Trumpist USA, Bolsonarist Brazil, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, India, among many other countries) proliferated (RUNCIMAN, 2018). Populism has its own "modus operandi" and, today, it is the main threat to democratic regimes. It is necessary to understand what it represents and the problems it points to, in order to deal with them in a convenient way. Saving democracy has been the concern of many scholars and political leaders. The future will reveal the feasibility of this task, but the present demands understanding and action.

It is necessary for democratic regimes to be efficient in managing the economy, promoting equality and social justice, conditions that provide a sense of well-being, which is the essential structural condition for their stability. In the economic crisis, discontent and resentment proliferate, which are the raw material for the siren song of populist discourse (INGLEHART, 2018).

Communication through social networks cannot remain a free territory for the circulation of false news and disinformation. Without hampering the free expression of ideas, it is necessary to seek self-regulation of platforms, which is already happening, and the establishment of normative frameworks that protect people and society from fake news (FUKUYAMA; RICHMAN; GOEL, 2021). Countries, notably those in Europe, are already advancing in this challenge.

Educational institutions have the challenge of preparing the new generations for critical thinking and for the acquisition of skills capable of creating a filter in the face of news and messages that bombard society on a daily basis. The information age cannot live with the level of gullibility and ignorance seen in recent times. And nothing that is done by the institutions will be enough to avoid the deception of the unwary.

Global governance must be structured, reinforced or reformed to prevent or minimize the destructive effect of events that have a profound impact on the feelings and way of life of the population, as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, and which had such a negative impact caused the weakening of democratic institutions. Or to prevent conflicts between countries, whatever they may be, from creating economic, demographic and political disruptions that are highly harmful to peace and social stability, as was the case with

conflicts in North Africa, the Middle East and, at this moment, in Ukraine.

And most importantly: the problems generated in the world, whatever their nature, can only be faced politically. Politics is the sphere in which subjects endowed with conscience and will meet to solve problems, plan and build the future.

Society's almost general distrust of politics, politicians and political parties is an open flank to the degeneration of the social fabric and the openness to messianisms that flourish in chaos. Without rescuing the political sphere as a meeting place for subjects and divergent proposals, radicalism and extremism will oppose people, classes, categories and will make the social environment unbreathable.

Political leaders are and will be fundamental in the search for solutions to society's problems and for the preservation of democracy. They must be endowed with wisdom, great capacity for dialogue, ability to articulate forces, endowed with prudence and a spirit of moderation. They may not fix everything or be optimal, but they will convey to people the trustworthiness without which sound political representation is impossible. They cannot be taken by "hybris", but driven by "sophrosyne" (GONZÁLES; FELIPE, 2021; LEVITSKY; ZIBLAT, 2018; ROSANVALLON, 2018)

There are examples in the past and today of leaders who acted wisely in turbulent times: Solon, Cleisthenes in the Greek world, Cicero in the Roman world, and, in contemporary times, Nelson Mandela, Angela Merkel, among many others that can be related. Little Uruguay is full of examples of wise leaders from the left and right who carefully manage the affairs of the State and have the trust of society.

Churchill's aphorism became famous when he stated that "democracy is the worst form of government except the others" in a famous speech of 1947 in the House of Commons. Norberto Bobbio (1986) showed that democracy may not keep all its promises, but it is a regime built for imperfect men, in his words: "to bring democracy down from the sky of principles to the earth where interests collide". (p. 14).

Runciman (2018) echoes Churchill and Bobbio. Your question is illustrative: is there anything better to substitute for democracy? "Instead of seeing democracy as the least worst form of politics, we could think that it is the best when the worst comes" (p. 199).

In authoritarian regimes (China, North Korea, Russia, among others) the leader remains free. In populist regimes, the manipulation and constant bewitchment of the electorate. In democracies, the possibility of questioning, opposition and voting. Trump lost the election in 2020, Bolsonaro in 2022. Faced with Benjamin Netanyahu's attempt to impose reforms on the Israeli judiciary, a crowd took to the streets and prevented his success. The counterpart can be seen in Putin: with no domestic opposition stifled by years of persecution, the invasion of Ukraine was a unilateral act of his imperial discretion.

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